Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

"Cooking in Someone Else's Kitchen": Exploring Food as a Commonplace for Antiracist Pedagogy, White Allyship, and Feeding Civic Imagination

by E. Vivian Leigh | Feeding the Civic Imagination, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Asao Inoue's metaphor "cooking in someone else's kitchen" provides a conceptual framework describing how white educators may navigate teaching topics outside of the subject positions they occupy. I apply an intentionally literal interpretation of Inoue's metaphor, to position food culture as an important component of social justice pedagogy. As post-secondary institutions prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, antiracist pedagogies have become a source of uneasiness for many white educators. Often, these educators may give excuses stemming from embodied positionality and fear of saying something wrong, which may become reasons to avoid difficult classroom conversations. As a result, universities lose opportunities to educate students about race-related issues, along with the potential for increased civic engagement. This paper addresses white teachers' apprehension surrounding antiracist pedagogy and presents a food-themed writing course focused on how food has been weaponized historically, contributing to racial, class, and gender injustice—and how similar systems of oppression are still in effect currently. The course centers food as a commonplace to explore race, racism, and cultural difference—while helping teachers gain confidence in joining antiracist efforts.

KEYWORDS anti-racism, civic engagement, food, pedagogy

As a white, antiracist educator I continually grapple with my own embodied positionality. My initial struggle led me to situate food as a commonplace, or access point, to explore racial and cultural identities. *Commonplace* in this context is synonymous with Aristotle's term *topoi* which locates places in general

subjects to make nuanced arguments."[1] Positioning food as a commonplace creates a space to explore oppression, racism, and social issues through the shared familiarity of food. The collective connections aid in understanding social issues despite varying levels of social consciousness among students because "classrooms are not homogeneous environments with a common understanding of oppression, but deeply divided places where contested narratives are steeped in the politics of emotions [which] create complex emotional and intellectual challenges for educators."[2] I contend that examining social justice through food may encourage other hesitant white educators to engage antiracist curriculums. As post-secondary education calls for increased efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, it cannot be overlooked that "more than 85% of urban educators are white in the face of an increasingly multiracial, multicultural, multilingual student body."[3] When an educator does not occupy subject positions about which they are teaching, but their students do, it can provide a challenge . Struggles similar to mine may occur when white educators fear accusations of misrepresenting a community or communities to which they do not belong. Underlying this uneasiness, Mara Holt states, is the feeling of being unprepared, the worry of doing more harm than good, and beliefs that others are more qualified, leading white educators to buy into the myth that such instructors "exist in abundance, are close by, and should be doing it instead of us."[4] And there is an unfortunate narrative and set of expectations that BIPOC teachers are best suited to do this kind of work—which has often given white educators a path of avoidance. However, Asao Inoue argues that white teachers should "be the first in line" for antiracist activism and likens the feelings of unpreparedness to "cooking in someone else's kitchen."[5] Inoue uses this metaphor to explain how some white educators don't know what resources to use, what may be off-limits, and what they can bring to conversations outside of the subject positions they occupy.

In negotiating feeling unprepared to "cook in someone else's kitchen," I apply an intentionally literal interpretation of Inoue's metaphor, to bridge the relationship between food and identity in classrooms. Prompting this is the idea that "food

studies can . . . constitute a new movement, not only as an academic discipline but also as a means to change society,"[6] along with Marion Nestle's claim that scholarly interest in food studies is now an approach to cultural, behavioral, historical, socioeconomic, and biological research,[7] thus outlining shared goals with antiracist pedagogy. Bearing these perspectives in mind, I designed a First-Year Writing course that establishes aspects of food culture as sites to locate social injustices and make deeper connections to systems of oppression enacted through food-related practices. Examining racial and cultural identities through food provided the critical distance necessary for me to better understand the challenges and complexities of antiracist pedagogy, which in turn developed my understanding of my role as an antiracist educator. Although I developed this course from a perspective rooted in whiteness, it is important to recognize that it can still be valuable to BIPOC educators as well. Overall, my intent is to ease some of the burden placed on BIPOC educators and increase white allyship. For teachers interested in social justice-based education, this approach provides a useful model for introducing difficult subjects and conversations in culturally responsive ways. The collective understanding and/or relearning of how people relate to what they eat contributes to civic imagination by encouraging students to critically evaluate their subject positions and situatedness in cultural and historical contexts. Subsequently, they may leave the classroom with an enhanced capacity for forging cross-cultural relationships and building coalitions based on principles of interconnectedness.

The course follows the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing developed by one of the governing professional bodies in writing studies, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA). Primary learning objectives include rhetorical awareness, critical thinking skills, and knowledge of writing processes and conventions. Secondary objectives took the form of goals based in cultural competence, which can be loosely defined as a set of organizational principles that engage cultural, linguistic, and other human differences in a generative manner built on understanding and empathy.

My interest in cultural competence as a learning outcome emerged from teaching at a predominantly white, mid-sized research institution in rural Appalachia. The campus environment was increasingly marked by hostility and racial strife in the context of the 2016 presidential election and the Black Lives Matter movement. The cultural competence goals were a curricular intervention proposed by the director of Composition and implemented by a team of invested teachers, of which I was a member. My food-themed course stemmed from this experience, in part to test the goals application in other courses. I selected topics that fit within each unit's genre-based goals, intentionally selecting topics and readings to explore contemporary social issues through food.

Sample Assignments/Materials

The class is designed on the premise that food is not neutral ground because it is embedded in complex histories of colonialism, slavery, and survival. The assigned text is Lunsford et al.'s *Everyone's an Author* with five units organized around specific course objectives. Each unit culminates with a major project to apply learned concepts. Major projects may take the form of traditional writing assignments (essays) or a multimodal equivalent (projects composed by combining multiple modes including words, images, audio, hyperlinks and/or video). Additional supplemental materials and discussion topics (outlined below) are incorporated to unify the food theme and social issues.

Unit 1: Food and Identity

Narrative writing helps students situate themselves within the course theme while learning about food's impacts on facets of identity. Students are asked to notice details and question possible hidden meanings. The combination engages civic imagination by challenging inequities in representation.

Major Assignment: Writing a narrative (or scripted podcast). Students describe an event or experience with food and how it changed or impacted them through understanding their culture, ethnic, or religious identity.

Artifact for Analysis:

- Reading: *The Subtle Racism Around Us (Even in a Cup of Coffee)* by Hinda Mandell

Discussion Topic:

- Coffee branding, racial identity, and institutionalized racism
- Rebranding products like Aunt Jemima syrup and Uncle Ben's rice

Unit 2: Food Histories

The second unit contextualizes food's connection to identity and culture through food histories. Students gain insights on inequity by also considering structural oppression through the lens of literacy and privilege.

Major Assignment: Reporting information (or visual essay). Students analyze the historical/cultural relevance of a particular food and its connection(s) to identity.

Artifacts for Analysis:

- Documentary: *The Search for General Tso* by Jennifer 8 Lee
- Reading: "The Un-Pretty History of Georgia's Iconic Peach" by Tove Danovich

Discussion Topics:

- How minoritized groups used food to gain acceptance in white communities
- White-washing history
- Oppressive literacy practices

Unit 3: Food Politics

Racism and controversy surrounding the Confederate flag are addressed through food. Injustice and class privilege are further engaged through food access and food deserts. The reading selections encourage civic imagination through compassion and building community.

Major Assignment: Arguing a Position (or class-wide debate). Students argue a position on a debatable food-related topic, responding to what others have said and providing appropriate background information.

Artifact for Analysis:

- Reading: "A Confederacy of Sauces" by Jack Hitt

Discussion Topic:

- Charlottesville, the Confederate flag, and racial tension
- Class privilege and food deserts as primary sites of food injustice
- Race- and class-based inequity through gentrification

Unit 4: Food and Ethics

Compassion and ethics are connected through agricultural working conditions and human rights. The selected materials work in conversation with one another and model how to research a topic from multiple perspectives. Civic imagination is engaged through analyzing grassroots activism.

Major Assignment: Writing Analytically|Rogerian Argument. Students practice ethical evaluation through researching a food-related issue and from multiple perspectives.

Artifacts for Analysis:

- Documentary: *Food Chains*, developed by Eva Longoria and Eric Schlosser

- Reading: “Building a Better Tomato” by Barry Estabrook
- Broadcast: NPR 1A “Fair Treatment, Fast Food And The Fight Of The Coalition Of Immokalee Workers”

Discussion Topic:

- The poor treatment of migrant workers and human rights
- Cognitive dissonance purchasing brands that mistreat workers
- Grassroots activism that can extend beyond agriculture to all labor contexts

Unit 5: Food and Culture

Students analyze culture through restaurants and reflect on knowledge gained over the semester surrounding how food influences conceptualizations of culture and identity. Students also discuss ways that food impacts systems of oppression and liberation.

Major Assignment: Writing a Review. Students write an online review after going to a local restaurant with classmates to rhetorically analyze the theme, design, and menu, while building community.

The course culminates with students submitting a self-reflection considering the ways food impacts how they write, talk, think, and feel about identity and broader social inequities, and how food-related education and activism can foster change.

Implications

I started locating unsavory food histories knowing that systems of oppression are often intertwined. Food can encourage intervention against oppression because “food is clearly a link among generations of immigrants and exiles; those who cook and write about food are “culture-tenders” and at the same time teach

people outside the cultural community about that community's values, rituals, [and] beliefs."[8] When food is explored in terms of empowerment and subjugation, food histories enable increased understanding of inequity and social justice.

These histories are encompassed by the umbrella term "food justice," which Gottlieb and Joshi define as "movements in the food system to alleviate racial and gendered injustices and uneven access to healthy food, engage[ing] questions of the environment, land use and farming, health, immigration, worker rights, economic and community development, cultural integrity, and social justice."[9] And when food systems and practices contribute to injustice, the frameworks of food justice provide ways to recognize effective interventions.

Student Output and Assessment

While the course engages antiracist practices, white students often feel similar tensions to those of white instructors in terms of worrying about speaking out of place. To encourage meaningful discussions, I begin the semester by addressing these tensions head on. In the first week of class, I orient the classroom as a constructive learning environment, not a destructive one, and set the intention for our classroom to be a space that builds students up, enhancing their strengths, and not a place to tear people down. I remind students that the course covers sensitive content and state that I do not expect all students to share the same views, or to arrive at the same stance. I also let them know that I welcome voices of dissent, and do not expect anyone to merely say what they think I want them to say. Instead, I let them know that I see my job as providing multiple perspectives, but it is up to them to decide what to do with the information they are provided. I also make it very clear that because we are in a space of learning, students should be willing to grant each other compassion, or at least grace, in order to process information and learn new things. I tell students that people may have missteps along the way, and that is okay. And I explain that should a student need to apologize for a misstep, the class can benefit from understanding what might

have been offensive or upsetting and why, and that we can see it as a teaching and learning moment for growth and move forward productively.

At times, some white students may struggle to develop a stronger critical lens toward racism claiming they do not see racism happening around them, or focusing on ideas of "reverse racism," or illustrating a general lack of sensitivity in understanding how racism impacts people they may not interact with. In these instances, I let go of feeling like I need to change their views. I acknowledge the feelings that students believe are truthful and let them grapple with their viewpoints alongside the materials presented through the course. Included in this material are perspectives of BIPOC students who were able to use the class as an opportunity to explore various facets of their identities through writing. Though the class is not a creative writing course, students often found avenues for creative forms of expression. For example, one student crafted a narrative about food traditions in his extended family with portions written in Spanish (and translated). His paper allowed students to understand a nuanced outlook on linguistic dominance and conversations around English as the perceived official language of America.

Success in antiracist pedagogy, particularly in terms of cultivating a civic imagination can be measured by several key indicators including the following:

- *An inclusive curriculum* with diverse perspectives that address issues of racial injustice and challenge grand narratives.
- *A safe and inclusive classroom environment*. As mentioned previously, the classroom should be considered a constructive learning space where students of all backgrounds feel respected, heard, and valued.
- *Critical thinking and analysis.* Assignments and activities that explore complex issues related to racism in multiple contexts including academic and social settings.
- *Increased awareness and compassion.* When connecting learning to real-world experiences, I used to put empathy in place of compassion but find that students respond better to being asked to understand what it means to be compassionate, rather than feeling required to display empathy.

- *An antiracist approach to assessment practices* that aligns assignment criteria with antiracist goals; allows choice and autonomy; and provides clear, transparent grading criteria with rubrics. I evaluate students' abilities to analyze the major course themes and topics, rather than their ability to restate information provided to them.

Reflection

Initially, my positionality led me to feel I needed the food-themed topics in case classroom discussions became heated, to shift the focus back to food. But I learned I did not need to rely on food to moderate conversations because my students embraced talking about social issues. Many stated our class was the first place they could have such discussions outside of their families and like-minded communities and learn about views differing from their own. The curriculum might be received differently by various audiences, but I have learned the content allows BIPOC students to be content experts, instead of the content reinforcing the dominant view of white students. Additionally, students have sent emails thanking me for being willing to "go there" with discussions about race and social issues. Conversely, I also learned students who harbor racist sentiment will entertain material I present *because* I am white, and I contend that white educators need to be willing to sit with the discomfort that brings.

Positioning food as a commonplace to engage antiracist pedagogy contributes to the concept of civic imagination in three primary ways: 1) White educators can draw on the lens of food to gain confidence teaching perspectives outside of their embodied positionalities; 2) Food can increase understandings of systems of oppression that extend to greater contexts; and 3) Food may encourage civic action by outlining accessible forms of activism. Situating social issues within food while presenting food culture as a pathway to equity and social justice helped me embrace antiracist pedagogy. Encouraging students to engage civic imagination and advocating alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or

economic conditions needs to be a collective effort. And white educators should be available to talk with unsure allies about their discomfort, missteps, and how to keep cooking in someone else's kitchen, even when they feel unable to stand the heat.

Notes

1. Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004).

2. Michalinos Zembylas, "Pedagogies of Strategic Empathy: Navigating through the Emotional Complexities of Anti-Racism in Higher Education," *Teaching in Higher Education* 17, no. 2 (2012): 113–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.611869 < https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.611869> .

3. Jamila Lyiscott, *Black Appetite, White Food: Issues of Race, Voice, and Justice within and beyond the Classroom* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2019).

4. Mara Holt, David Johnson, E. Vivian Leigh, and Garrett Cummins, "Embodying Anti-Racist Pedagogy: Why Is It So Difficult?" *Journal of Teaching Writing* 37, no. 1 (2024): 69–94.

5. Asao B. Inoue, "Foreword: On Antiracist Agendas," in *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, ed. Frankie Condon, Vershawn Ashanti Young (Fort Collins, Colorado: WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado, 2016), xiv, https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-B.2016.0933.1.2 < https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-B.2016.0933.1.2> .

6. Berg, Jennifer, Nestle, Marion and Bentley, Amy. 2003. Food Studies. In: S. H. Katz and W. W. Weaver (eds) The Scribner Encyclopedia of Food and Culture, Vol. 2. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, pp. 16–18.

7. Marion Nestle and W. Alex Mcintosh, "Writing the Food Studies Movement," *Food, Culture & Society* 13, no. 2 (2010): 159–179, https://doi.org/10.2752/175174410X12633934462999 < https://doi.org/10.2752/175174410X12633934462999> .

8. Barbara Frey Waxman, "Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom," *College English* 70, no. 4 (2008): 363–83, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472276 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/25472276> .

9. Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi, *Food Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), xii.

Author Information

E. Vivian Leigh

E. Vivian Leigh is an Assistant Professor of Professional Communication at Clarkson University. She holds a PhD in English Rhetoric and Composition from Ohio University. Leigh's research interests explore social justice initiatives through intersectional approaches to feminist studies, while forging connections between bodily rhetorics, food studies, antiracist activism, and communication pedagogies. Her published essays and forthcoming book delve into representations of women, while her forthcoming articles explore the importance of anti-racist pedagogy.

View all of E. Vivian Leigh's articles.

Article details

E. Vivian Leigh, "'Cooking in Someone Else's Kitchen': Exploring Food as a Commonplace for Antiracist Pedagogy, White Allyship, and Feeding Civic Imagination," *Lateral* 13.1 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.1.12

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053